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FBI raids Georgia churches near military bases, sources say church was targeting soldiers

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The FBI on Thursday raided three churches associated with the House of Prayer Christian Church in Georgia and Texas.

The FBI has not released a statement regarding the raids.

The House of Prayer is owned by the foreign nonprofit company House of Prayer Christian Churches of America Inc., which registered with the Georgia Secretary of State in 2004. The business's listed officers are affiliated with the Georgia churches and use Hinesville, Georgia, post office boxes as mailing addresses.

Its churches, which are primarily located near military bases throughout the country, have been accused by former members and a veterans' advocacy group of operating like a cult and targeting soldiers.

In August 2020, Veterans Education Success, an advocacy organization based in Washington D.C., asked the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Georgia Veterans Service to investigate alleged abuses of the GI Bill program by House of Prayer Christian Church's bible seminaries.

Veterans alleged the House of Prayer Christian Church "deceives the VA during inspections and targets veterans in order to access GI Bill funding, VA disability compensation, and VA home loans," according to the organization's letter to the VA and Georgia SAA.

Raid near Fort Stewart

The FBI on Thursday raided The House of Prayer Christian Church in Hinesville, Georgia. The raid took place just after 8 a.m. on the 2500 block of Airport Road.

Onlookers observed FBI agents with weapons traveling to multiple buildings while a group of women were being guarded by an officer with a weapon.

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Jenna Sellitto, an FBI spokesperson, confirmed the agency was executing a court-authorized search warrant. She said no arrests had been made as of Thursday afternoon.

The House of Prayer Christian Church in Hinesville is located less than 8 miles from Fort Stewart in Liberty County.

Raid near Fort Gordon

Half a dozen FBI agents were seen in the back of the Assembly of Prayer church on Tobacco Road in Hephzibah, Georgia during a raid that started at about 7:15 a.m. Thursday and continued into the afternoon.

According to a search of property records, House of Prayer Christian Churches owns 2952 Old Tobacco Road, the address of the Assembly of Prayer church in Richmond County.

At about 1 p.m., agents were seen using stairs at the back of the building during the investigation, according to Sgt. William McCarty with the Richmond County Sheriff's Office.

"We were there to assist them, but referring everything over to the FBI," said McCarty. He said he could not confirm if there were any arrests.

The Assembly of Prayer church in Hephzibah is located just outside of Gate 5 at Fort Gordon.

In an email sent Thursday, Anne H. Bowman, deputy public affairs officer at Fort Gordon, said "Fort Gordon was aware of the organization called the Assembly of Prayer Church through our law enforcement channels but the installation had no bans against the organization or any official dealings with them (despite their websites claims)."

Bowman confirmed "there were reports made to Fort Gordon law enforcement of recruiting/solicitation attempts by the church members but there were no incidents,

confrontations, arrests or anything of this nature as a result," she said in another email Thursday night.

Raid near Fort Hood

The Assembly of Prayer Christian Church on Massey Street in Killeen, Texas, was also raided by the FBI on Thursday, according to the Killeen Police Department.

The church is located less than 4 miles from Fort Hood.

Killeen officers arrived to assist the FBI with traffic diversion just after 7:30 a.m., according to officials.

Ashley Demorest, a former member of the church who observed the raid, said she was a member of the church from age 15 to 23, "until I finally escaped."

Amber Fitz-Randolph, leader of The Ft. Hood Fallen Facebook page, which was started in 2017, said members of the church in Killeen have snuck into the barracks and threatened soldiers.

In a text message Thursday afternoon, Christopher Haug, chief of media relations at Fort Hood, said they are aware the FBI is investigating the church and their police are looking into it.

Demorest said she solicited soldiers on base as a member of the church.

"When I was 16 I would go with other members to [Fort Hood] and do what the church would call 'soul winning' to invite people to the church," she said.

In the Veteran's Education Success's letter to the VA and Georgia SAA in 2020, the organization cited similar solicitations.

"Soul-winning is an organized event coordinated by HOPCC's clergy," noted the document. "Five days a week, individuals are paired up and sent out to recruit new members on or around military bases. ... Students would recruit at Post Exchanges, barracks, and on-base housing."

The document also cites specific members' experiences recruiting on bases in Georgia.

Abe Kenmore, Georgia statewide reporter for USA Today Network, contributed to this story.